

## DRAMA TERMS FOR AICE ENGLISH LITERATURE

### **Allegory**

A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. Allegory often takes the form of a story in which the characters represent moral qualities. The most famous example in English is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the name of the central character, Pilgrim, epitomizes the book's allegorical nature. Kay Boyle's story "Astronomer's Wife" and Christina Rossetti's poem "Up-Hill" both contain allegorical elements.

### **Alliteration**

The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Example: "Fetched fresh, as I suppose, off some sweet wood." Hopkins, "In the Valley of the Elwy."

### **Antagonist**

A character or force against which another character struggles. Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' play *Antigone*; Teiresias is the antagonist of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

### **Aside**

Words spoken by an actor directly to the audience, which are not "heard" by the other characters on stage during a play. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago voices his inner thoughts a number of times as "asides" for the play's audience.

### **Assonance**

The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sentence or a line of poetry or prose, as in "I rose and told him of my woe." Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" contains assonantal "I's" in the following lines: "How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick, / Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself."

### **Catastrophe**

The action at the end of a tragedy that initiates the denouement or falling action of a play. One example is the dueling scene in Act V of *Hamlet* in which Hamlet dies, along with Laertes, King Claudius, and Queen Gertrude.

### **Catharsis**

The purging of the feelings of pity and fear that, according to Aristotle, occur in the audience of tragic drama. The audience experiences catharsis at the end of the play, following the catastrophe.

### **Character**

An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change). In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static, like the minor character Bianca. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

### **Characterization**

The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. Readers come to understand the character Miss Emily in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" through what she says, how she lives, and what she does.

### **Chorus**

A group of characters in Greek tragedy (and in later forms of drama), who comment on the action of a play without participation in it. Their leader is the choragos. Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King* both contain an explicit chorus with a choragos. Tennessee Williams's *Glass Menagerie* contains a character who functions like a chorus.

### **Climax**

The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work. The climax of John Updike's "A & P," for example, occurs when Sammy quits his job as a cashier.

### **Comedy**

A type of drama in which the characters experience reversals of fortune, usually for the better. In comedy, things work out happily in the end. Comic drama may be either romantic--characterized by a tone of tolerance and geniality--or satiric. Satiric works offer a darker vision of human nature, one that ridicules human folly. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* is a romantic comedy; Chekhov's *Marriage Proposal* is a satiric comedy.

### **Comic relief**

The use of a comic scene to interrupt a succession of intensely tragic dramatic moments. The comedy of scenes offering comic relief typically parallels the tragic action that the scenes interrupt. Comic relief is lacking in Greek tragedy, but occurs regularly in Shakespeare's tragedies. One example is the opening scene of Act V of *Hamlet*, in which a gravedigger banters with Hamlet.

### **Complication**

An intensification of the conflict in a story or play. Complication builds up, accumulates, and develops the primary or central conflict in a literary work. Frank O'Connor's story "Guests of the Nation" provides a striking example, as does Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal."

### **Conflict**

A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. Lady Gregory's one-act play *The Rising of the Moon* exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer.

### **Connotation**

The associations called up by a word that goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets, especially, tend to use words rich in connotation. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" includes intensely connotative language, as in these lines: "Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright / Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

### **Convention**

A customary feature of a literary work, such as the use of a chorus in Greek tragedy, the inclusion of an explicit moral in a fable, or the use of a particular rhyme scheme in a villanelle. Literary conventions are defining features of particular literary genres, such as novel, short story, ballad, sonnet, and play.

## DRAMA TERMS FOR AICE ENGLISH LITERATURE

### Denotation

The dictionary meaning of a word. Writers typically play off a word's denotative meaning against its connotations, or suggested and implied associational implications. In the following lines from Peter Meinke's "Advice to My Son" the references to flowers and fruit, bread and wine denote specific things, but also suggest something beyond the literal, dictionary meanings of the words:

To be specific, between the peony and rose  
Plant squash and spinach, turnips and tomatoes;  
Beauty is nectar and nectar, in a desert, saves--  
...  
and always serve bread with your wine.  
But, son,  
always serve wine.

### Denouement

The resolution of the plot of a literary work. The denouement of *Hamlet* takes place after the catastrophe, with the stage littered with corpses. During the denouement Fortinbras makes an entrance and a speech, and Horatio speaks his sweet lines in praise of Hamlet.

### Deus ex machina

A god who resolves the entanglements of a play by supernatural intervention. The Latin phrase means, literally, "a god from the machine." The phrase refers to the use of artificial means to resolve the plot of a play.

### Dialogue

The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

### Diction

The selection of words in a literary work. A work's diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values. We can speak of the diction particular to a character, as in Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in *Othello*. We can also refer to a poet's diction as represented over the body of his or her work, as in Donne's or Hughes's diction.

### Dramatic monologue

A type of poem in which a speaker addresses a silent listener. As readers, we overhear the speaker in a dramatic monologue. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" represents the epitome of the genre.

### Dramatis personae

Latin for the characters or persons in a play. Included among the dramatis personae of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are Willy Loman, the salesman, his wife Linda, and his sons Biff and Happy.

### Exposition

The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for instance, begins with a conversation between the two central characters, a dialogue that fills the audience in on events that occurred before the action of the play begins, but which are important in the development of its plot.

### Fable

A brief story with an explicit moral provided by the author. Fables typically include animals as characters. Their most famous practitioner in the west is the ancient Greek writer Aesop, whose "The Dog and the Shadow" and "The Wolf and the Mastiff" are included in this book.

### Falling action

In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution. The falling action of *Othello* begins after Othello realizes that Iago is responsible for plotting against him by spurring him on to murder his wife, Desdemona.

### Fiction

An imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama. Ibsen's Nora is fictional, a "make-believe" character in a play, as are Hamlet and Othello. Characters like Robert Browning's Duke and Duchess from his poem "My Last Duchess" are fictional as well, though they may be based on actual historical individuals. And, of course, characters in stories and novels are fictional, though they, too, may be based, in some way, on real people. The important thing to remember is that writers embellish and embroider and alter actual life when they use real life as the basis for their work. They fictionalize facts and deviate from real-life situations as they "make things up."

### Figurative language

A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration, litotes or understatement, simile and metaphor, which employ comparison, and synecdoche and metonymy, in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

### Flashback

An interruption of a work's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time. Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" includes flashbacks.

### Foil

A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. Laertes, in *Hamlet*, is a foil for the main character; in *Othello*, Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.

### Foot

A metrical unit composed of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example, an iamb or iambic foot is represented by ~, that is, an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. Frost's line "Whose woods these are I think I know" contains four iambs, and is thus an iambic foot.

## DRAMA TERMS FOR AICE ENGLISH LITERATURE

### **Foreshadowing**

Hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* includes foreshadowing as does Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. So, too, do Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and Chopin's "Story of an Hour."

### **Fourth wall**

The imaginary wall of the box theater setting, supposedly removed to allow the audience to see the action. The fourth wall is especially common in modern and contemporary plays such as Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Wasserstein's *Tender Offer*, and Wilson's *Fences*.

### **Gesture**

The physical movement of a character during a play. Gesture is used to reveal character, and may include facial expressions as well as movements of other parts of an actor's body. Sometimes a playwright will be very explicit about both bodily and facial gestures, providing detailed instructions in the play's stage directions. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* includes such stage directions. See *Stage direction*.

### **Hyperbole**

A figure of speech involving exaggeration. John Donne uses hyperbole in his poem: "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star."

### **Iamb**

An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in *to-DAY*. See *Foot*.

### **Image**

A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Imagery refers to the pattern of related details in a work. In some works one image predominates either by recurring throughout the work or by appearing at a critical point in the plot. Often writers use multiple images throughout a work to suggest states of feeling and to convey implications of thought and action. Some modern poets, such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, write poems that lack discursive explanation entirely and include only images. Among the most famous examples is Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

### **Imagery**

The pattern of related comparative aspects of language, particularly of images, in a literary work. Imagery of light and darkness pervade James Joyce's stories "Araby," "The Boarding House," and "The Dead." So, too, does religious imagery.

### **Irony**

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In verbal irony, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In irony of circumstance or situation, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In dramatic irony, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters. Flannery O'Connor's short stories employ all these forms of irony, as does Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."

### **Literal language**

A form of language in which writers and speakers mean exactly what their words denote. See *Figurative language*, *Denotation*, and *Connotation*.

### **Metaphor**

A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as *like* or *as*. An example is "My love is a red, red rose,"

From Burns's "A Red, Red Rose." Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" is built entirely of metaphors. Metaphor is one of the most important of literary uses of language. Shakespeare employs a wide range of metaphor in his sonnets and his plays, often in such density and profusion that readers are kept busy analyzing and interpreting and unraveling them. Compare *Simile*.

### **Meter**

The measured pattern of rhythmic accents in poems. See *Foot* and *Iamb*.

### **Metonymy**

A figure of speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. An example: "We have always remained loyal to the crown." See *Synecdoche*.

### **Monologue**

A speech by a single character without another character's response. See *Dramatic monologue* and *Soliloquy*.

### **Narrator**

The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. For example, the narrator of Joyce's "Araby" is not James Joyce himself, but a literary fictional character created expressly to tell the story. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" contains a communal narrator, identified only as "we." See *Point of view*.

### **Onomatopoeia**

The use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. Words such as *buzz* and *crack* are onomatopoeic. The following line from Pope's "Sound and Sense" onomatopoeically imitates in sound what it describes:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,  
The line too labors, and the words move slow.

Most often, however, onomatopoeia refers to words and groups of words, such as Tennyson's description of the "murmur of innumerable bees," which attempts to capture the sound of a swarm of bees buzzing.

### **Parody**

A humorous, mocking imitation of a literary work, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its playful imitation. Examples include Bob McKenty's parody of Frost's "Dust of Snow" and Kenneth Koch's parody of Williams's "This is Just to Say."

### **Pathos**

A quality of a play's action that stimulates the audience to feel pity for a character. Pathos is always an aspect of tragedy, and may be present in comedy as well.

## DRAMA TERMS FOR AICE ENGLISH LITERATURE

### Personification

The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

### Plot

The unified structure of incidents in a literary work. See *Conflict*, *Climax*, *Denouement*, and *Flashback*.

### Point of view

The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. See *Narrator*. A work's point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character or an observer, respectively; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things about the characters but not everything.

### Props

Articles or objects that appear on stage during a play. The Christmas tree in *A Doll's House* and Laura's collection of glass animals in *The Glass Menagerie* are examples.

### Protagonist

The main character of a literary work--Hamlet and Othello in the plays named after them, Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Paul in Lawrence's "Rocking-Horse Winner."

### Quatrain

A four-line stanza in a poem, the first four lines and the second four lines in a Petrarchan sonnet. A Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains followed by a couplet.

### Recognition

The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is. Sophocles' Oedipus comes to this point near the end of *Oedipus the King*; Othello comes to a similar understanding of his situation in Act V of *Othello*.

### Resolution

The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. See *Plot*.

### Reversal

The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. Oedipus's and Othello's recognitions are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn. See *Recognition* and also *Irony*.

### Rising action

A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's or story's plot leading up to the climax. See *Climax*, *Denouement*, and *Plot*.

### Satire

A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a famous example. Chekhov's *Marriage Proposal* and O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," have strong satirical elements.

### Setting

The time and place of a literary work that establish its context. The stories of Sandra Cisneros are set in the American southwest in the mid to late 20th century, those of James Joyce in Dublin, Ireland in the early 20th century.

### Simile

A figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using *like*, *as*, or *as though*. An example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

### Soliloquy

A speech in a play that is meant to be heard by the audience but not by other character on the stage. If there are no other characters present, the soliloquy represents the character thinking aloud. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech is an example. See *Aside*.

### Stage direction

A playwright's descriptive or interpretive comments that provide readers (and actors) with information about the dialogue, setting, and action of a play. Modern playwrights, including Ibsen, Shaw, Miller, and Williams tend to include substantial stage directions while earlier playwrights typically used them more sparsely, implicitly, or not at all. See *Gesture*.

### Staging

The spectacle a play presents in performance, including the position of actors on stage, the scenic background, the props and costumes, and the lighting and sound effects. Tennessee Williams describes these in his detailed stage directions for *The Glass Menagerie* and also in his production notes for the play.

### Stanza

A division or unit of a poem that is repeated in the same form--either with similar or identical patterns or rhyme and meter, or with variations from one stanza to another. The stanzas of Gertrude Schnackenberg's "Signs" are regular; those of Rita Dove's "Canary" are irregular.

### Style

The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with description, imagery, and other literary techniques. See *Connotation*, *Denotation*, *Diction*, *Figurative language*, *Image*, *Imagery*, *Irony*, *Metaphor*, *Narrator*, *Point of view*, *Syntax*, and *Tone*.

### Subject

What a story or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is about the decline of a particular way of life endemic to the American south before the civil war. Its plot concerns how Faulkner describes and organizes the actions of the story's characters. Its theme is the overall meaning Faulkner conveys.

### Subplot

A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot with the overall plot of *Hamlet*.

## DRAMA TERMS FOR AICE ENGLISH LITERATURE

### Symbol

An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself. The glass unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*, the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"--all are symbols in this sense.

### Synecdoche

A figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole. An example: "Lend me a hand." See *Metonymy*.

### Syntax

The grammatical order of words in a sentence or line of verse or dialogue. The organization of words and phrases and clauses in sentences of prose, verse, and dialogue. In the following example, normal syntax (subject, verb, object order) is inverted:

"Whose woods these are I think I know."

### Tercet

A three-line stanza, as the stanzas in Frost's "Acquainted With the Night" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." The three-line stanzas or sections that together constitute the sestet of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet.

### Theme

The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

### Tone

The implied attitude of a writer toward the subject and characters of a work, as, for example, Flannery O'Connor's ironic tone in her "Good Country People." See *Irony*.

### Tragedy

A type of drama in which the characters experience reversals of fortune, usually for the worse. In tragedy, catastrophe and suffering await many of the characters, especially the hero. Examples include Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Hamlet*; Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. See *Tragic flaw* and *Tragic hero*.

### Tragic flaw

A weakness or limitation of character, resulting in the fall of the tragic hero. Othello's jealousy and too trusting nature is one example. See *Tragedy* and *Tragic hero*.

### Tragic hero

A privileged, exalted character of high repute, who, by virtue of a tragic flaw and fate, suffers a fall from glory into suffering. Sophocles' Oedipus is an example. See *Tragedy* and *Tragic flaw*.

### Understatement

A figure of speech in which a writer or speaker says less than what he or she means; the opposite of exaggeration. The last line of Frost's "Birches" illustrates this literary device: "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches."

### Unities

The idea that a play should be limited to a specific time, place, and story line. The events of the plot should occur within a twenty-four hour period, should occur within a give geographic locale, and should tell a single story. Aristotle argued that Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* was the perfect play for embodying the unities.

### Villanelle

A nineteen-line lyric poem that relies heavily on repetition. The first and third lines alternate throughout the poem, which is structured in six stanzas --five tercets and a concluding quatrain. Examples include Bishop's "One Art," Roethke's "The Waking," and Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."